Content-based Language Teaching to Arouse Students' Interest in EFL Context

Yin Yin Kyi
University of Computer Studies, Mandalay
Myanmar
yinyinkyi.mlw@gmail.com

Ni Ni San
University of Computer Studies, Yangon
Myanmar
ninisan70@gmail.com

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This proposed paper focuses on some practical ways of generating students' interest through content-based teaching. It is "Interest" that is essential in teaching/ learning a foreign language like English. The use of available technology, the Internet, helps both teachers and students to access a large amount of up-to-date materials free of charge. Thus, students become more motivated in language learning and would likely to perform or share their parts as language learners since more enthusiasm is created owing to interesting contents of authentic texts. This paper is written based on different sources of articles depicting the background theories and role of content-based language teaching. In this respect, the teacher acts as a moderator/manager to keep the teaching/ learning process in action. Upon applying the proposed method, learning English becomes more enjoyable and dynamic. Moreover, students' language skills are fostered and their word-powers are reinforced up to a certain level.

Keywords: content-based teaching, interest, Internet, enthusiasm

INTRODUCTION

In most EFL contexts, learners are really afraid to speak or write in English in front of others. Since "Interest" plays a key role in almost every area, it is essential to generate students' interest in learning a foreign language. According to **McCroskey & Richmond** (1991), students may have developed negative attitudes towards learning if they are deprived of motivation to insert more effort in it. Thus, interest and motivation are of primary importance in training students to be active in real language classroom situations.

Information that has a greater number of connections to related information promotes better learning (it is more likely that content will have a greater number of connections to other information) (Anderson, 1990).

This paper is meant to provide EFL teachers with a range of suggestive techniques and strategies to evoke students' curiosity in learning English through content-based teaching approach.

1. BACKGROUND

In this IT-era, the field of language teaching has inevitably undergone various changes and incorporated with new technologies. Content-based Language Teaching (CBLT) has grown enormously in recent years. New trends in language teaching and learning have been shifted to promote communicative competence instead of being competent in grammatical rules, word-power, reading, writing, or listening in isolation. Currently, CBL promotes real practice in the target language and offers different contexts for language study

2. WHAT IS CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION?

Content-based instruction (CBI) is a teaching method that emphasizes learning about something rather than learning about language. Although CBI is not new, there has been an increased interest in it over the last ten years, particularly in the USA and Canada where it has proven very effective in ESL immersion programs. This interest has now spread to EFL classrooms around the world where

teachers are discovering that their students like CBI and are excited to learn English this way.

The focus of a CBI lesson is on the topic or subject matter. During the lesson students are focused on learning about something. This could be anything that interests them from a serious science subject to their favourite pop star or even a topical news story or film. They learn about this subject using the language they are trying to learn, rather than their native language, as a tool for developing knowledge and so they develop their linguistic ability in the target language. This is thought to be a more natural way of developing language ability and one that corresponds more to the way we originally learn our first language.

Using content from other disciplines in language courses is not a new idea. For years, specialized language courses have included content relevant to a particular profession or academic discipline. So, for example, the content of a language course for doctors is quite different from one for sailors. The prominent characteristic of content-based instruction is that it incorporate the learning of the language with the learning of some other content. It has been observed that most academic subjects provide natural content for language instruction. Such observations motivated the "language across the curriculum" movement for native English speakers in England, which was launched in the 1970s to integrate the teaching of reading and writing into other subject areas. Of course, when students study academic subjects in a non-native language, they will need a great deal of assistant in understanding subject matter texts; therefore, there must be clear language objectives as well as content learning objectives.

3. ROLE OF MOTIVATION IN LANGUAGE CLASSES

A lot of factors contribute to success in language learning. However, one of the most important factors is the learner's motivation to learn the language in order to be able to use it in real-life situations. Research and experience show that learners with strong motivation can achieve a lot regardless of circumstances. It is natural that not all the learners in the classroom have the same type and level of motivation- some learners may have a very strong motivation to learn the language, while others may have a weaker motivation, and yet others may have no motivation at all. It is motivation that is essential in language learning, one of the challenging tasks of the teacher is to evoke, sustain and enhance learner's motivation.

According to Harmer (2001: 53-54), there are three areas where teacher's behavior can influence learner's motivation.

Goals and goal setting: Learners who set goals and expectations for language learning are likely to be motivated to achieve those goals. Teachers can help learners sustain their motivation for achieving their long-term goals by focusing on short-term goals as they can be attained in a shorter time, so that learners can see the results which will motivate them to continue to work hard in order to achieve their long-term goals.

Learning environment: The physical appearance and the emotional atmosphere of the lesson are very important for learner's motivation.

Interesting classes: One way of increasing learner's motivation to learn the language is by using a variety of interesting topics and activities in order to keep learners engaged and interested in what they are doing in the classroom.

Ur (1996:280) points out that 'it is in the arousing of interest, perhaps, that teachers invest most effort, and get most immediate and noticeable pay-off in terms of learner motivation". She lists several ways of arousing learner interest in the tasks and activities in the classroom:

- ➢ Setting clear tasks goals.
- ➢ Using varied topics and tasks.
- ➢ Using visuals.
- ➢ Incorporating tension and challenge by using game-like activities.
- ➢ Providing entertainment in the form of jokes, stories, dramatic presentations,

movies, video clips, television documentaries, etc.
- ➢ Using role-play and simulations.
- ➢ Using information gap activities.
- ➢ Personalizing tasks and activities.
- ➢ Using tasks and activities with open-ended cues.

Since classroom activities may have a considerable influence on learner's motivation and since it is the teacher who plans, designs and organizes them, it is worth investing time and effort in preparing these activities in order to make them interesting and motivational for learners. However, teachers should be aware that learners of different ages have different types of motivation, so that they cannot use the same methods with all groups of learners.

Harmer (1991: 7-8) describes the characteristics of the learners of different ages and different levels and suggests ways of approaching them. For example, because children are curious and have a short span of attention and concentration they need frequent changes of activities which should be exciting and which stimulate their curiosity. In this respect, teachers can do a lot to help learners develop motivation and interest for learning the language.

4. WHAT DOES A CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION LESSON LOOK LIKE?
According to an article posted by British Council, there are several ways for creating a CBI lesson. This is one possible way.

Preparation

- ➢ Choose a subject of interest to students
- ➢ Find three or four suitable sources that deal with different aspects of the subject. These could be websites, reference books, audio or video of lectures or even real people.

During the lesson

- ➢ Divide the class into small groups and assign each group a small research task and a source of information to use to help them fulfil the task.
- ➢ Then once they have done their research they form new groups with students that used other information sources and share and compare their information.
- ➢ There should then be some product as the end result of this sharing of information which could take the form of a group report or presentation of some kind.

5. WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION?

There are a number of advantages of content-based instructions. Some of them are:

- ➢ It can make learning a language more interesting and motivating. Students can use the language to fulfil a real purpose, which can make students both more independent and confident.
- ➢ Students can also develop a much wider knowledge of the world through CBI which can feed back into improving and supporting their general educational needs.
- ➢ CBI is very popular among EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teachers as it helps students to develop valuable study skills such as note taking, summarising and extracting key information from texts.
- ➢ Taking information from different sources, re-evaluating and restructuring that information can help students to develop very valuable thinking skills that can then be transferred to other subjects.
- ➢ The inclusion of a group work element within the framework given above can also help students to develop their collaborative skills, which can have great social value.

6. WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL PROBLEMS?

On the other hand, it too has some problems concerned with CBI;

Since CBI isn't explicitly focused on language learning, some students may feel confused or may even feel that they aren't improving their language skills. This can be dealt by including some form of language focused follow-up exercises to help draw attention to linguistic features within the materials and consolidate any difficult vocabulary or grammar points.

Particularly in monolingual classes, the overuse of the students' native language during parts of the lesson can be a problem. Because the lesson isn't explicitly focused on language practice students find it much easier and quicker to use their mother tongue. Try sharing your rationale with students and explain the benefits of using the target language rather than their mother tongue.

It can be hard to find information sources and texts that lower levels can understand. Also the sharing of information in the target language may cause great difficulties. A possible way around this at lower levels is either to use texts in the students' native language and then get them to use the target language for the sharing of information and end product, or to have texts in the target language, but allow the students to present the end product in their native language. These options should reduce the level of challenge.

Some students may copy directly from the source texts they use to get their information. Avoid this by designing tasks that demand students evaluate the information in some way, to draw conclusions or actually to put it to some practical use. Having information sources that have conflicting information can also be helpful as students have to decide which information they agree with or most believe.

7. IMPLEMENTATION OF CONTENT-BASED TEACHING

Being aware of some theoretical background and those practical steps, some sample task-based activities are presented.

These activities are occasionally practised in three different language classes of University of Computer Studies, Mandalay (Myanmar). They are Third Year Course (B.C.Sc) with fifty students, Third Year Course (B.C.Tech) with twenty students and Second Year Course (B.C.Sc) with fifty nine students respectively. In this case, the Internet is used as a teaching aid to find the necessary supplementary material as it is abundant with a variety of resources. Moreover, at our university (UCSM) every classroom is equipped with basic facilities to have easy and quick access to the Internet. Normally, the author would like to browse through **"rdasia.com"** to find the topics of interest to teach students.

Once a suitable article or a piece of written text, which might be in accord with the current issue such as environmental or health related topic, is found, it is adapted for teaching purposes. Sometimes, such texts are used to teach students some environmental issues like ways to beat plastic bags as well as up-to-date usages of language in authentic materials. By choosing such kind of topic, students are automatically informed of the hot issues concerned with environment, health and other topics of interest. Simultaneously, awareness-raising activities on particular topics are accomplished. If the students are bored with the current topic, they are asked to read other things like jokes or other topic of individual interest.

Whenever a content-based material is used, "Pre-teaching" activity is used as a very first stage to arouse the interest of the students. At this stage, a variety of techniques are employed - for example; group work or individual activity, guessing from pictures/photos, solving puzzles and so on. Normally, students are asked to perform the tasks in group so that they can discuss together and share ideas. Then, a representative from each group has to report back to the class and thus the

ideas discussed in peers are shared in the whole class.

After that, as a second stage: during-task activities are conducted and students have to refer to a specific article referred by the teacher. They have to do individual reading and then discussion follows. Here, the teacher would assist them if there is a need to clarify the meaning, sometimes acting as a manager of the class. At this very stage, some new difficult vocabularies, use of grammar, idioms and collocations found in the selected texts are taught to the students but most the tasks have to be performed by the students and the teacher has to pre-plan what might be done with the selected material.

As a final stage, which is a post-task activity, students are asked to choose any five new words or usages and use them in sentences. Or they are assigned to write an essay or a summary. To be able to carry out the assigned task, students are already fed with the necessary data as well as particular expressions upon reading the text. As a result, their anxiety towards a writing task is lessened.

8. FINDINGS

Thanks to the modified teaching practice as mentioned above which is based on interesting content, students are more motivated and enthusiastic towards language learning. The teaching/ learning situation of the EFL context become more realistic despite minor difficulties like classroom setting which is not easy to change. Prior to employing task-based activities as mentioned above, students were really reluctant to participate in classroom activities and do the writing task. Upon using the above stated task-based language teaching methods and strategies, there appears a more lively and interactive (EFL) language classroom. The students gain sense of achievement and their interest is at a peak.

9. SAMPLE CONTENT-BASED ACTIVITY

"6 Ways to Give Plastic Use The Flick" (downloaded from http://www.rdasia.com/) Pre-teaching Activity

The students are asked to discuss on the advantages and disadvantages of plastic bags and this task is done in groups for about ten minutes. After that, one group member has to share what each group has discussed. In this way, more ideas and facts are generated.

Figure (1) Brainstorming Session

Figure (2) Group Activity for Discussion

While-teaching Activity

At this stage, students are to read an article from rdasia.com "6 Ways to Give Plastic Use the Flick". Students read by themselves and explanation as well as discussion follow. After reading, oral questions to check their understanding of the contents of the passage. Sometimes, some exercises like matching, gap-filling and multiple choice questions will be set. Occasionally, students will be asked to choose any five new words found in the passage and use them in their own sentences.

Post-teaching Activity

As a final stage, what have covered in the previous stage will be summarized and peer correction is mostly done for objective type questions. As homework, students are assigned to write at least 250 words essay based on the chosen theme as a group activity.

The above is a sample material and whatever the material, the same processes can be followed. What have stated are the common processes the author follows when employing a content-based teaching. The same material is used for all three different classes to assign a writing task but the methods employed is adapted in accord with the level of students and the real classroom situations for creating a fruitful teaching/ learning situations. The main difficulty is students' frequent use of mother tongue and the teacher has to use both mother tongue and English alternatively for the sake of students whose proficiency level in English is not very good. However, as the saying goes **"Practice makes perfect"**: this challenge will be overcome eventually.

10. CONCLUSION

Content-based learning has developed significantly these days and has remained a potentially productive approach for a number of ESL/EFL teachers. In fact, it represents a trendy concept in language teaching. The purpose of teaching is not to assist learners in obtaining scheduled targets but to provide them with the context and conditions where language acquisition can take place. The teachers' roles have also been altered from instructor to establishers of study setting, assistants, guides, and advocates of the learning activities. Learners are the subjects in the classroom, which indicates that they are the key figures in the learning process. In fact, the benefits of content-based teaching of EFL are numerous as it can generate students' interest through employing challenging contents conveyed in a particular piece of material or writing. Thanks to CBI, language learning process in EFL context becomes more worth-while, stimulating and rewarding even though it is both challenging and demanding for the teacher and the students alike.

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